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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the father's contribution to child development in the context of a triadic family constellation, integrating data that parallel previous investigations of fathers: differences in children's behavior to mother and father, differences in mothers' and fathers' behavior to the child, and correlations between parental and child variables. The study treats the family triad as a system that is dynamic, examining the interactive behavior of mother, father, and child as they change over time. Data are drawn from a 1972-1973 longitudinal study of 14 children from 1 to 2 1/2 years of age. Children in the study were randomly selected from hospital birth records. All families were white, but a range of socioeconomic levels from working class to professional class was represented. All mothers were nonworking and were their children's primary caregivers. Data was gathered from: unstructured observations of child and family at home, semi-structured situations, questionnaires (daily records kept by the mother) as to the child's activities as well as questionnaires investigating parental attitudes towards the child; and assessments of the child's intellectual competence. A number of results were found and are discussed in some detail, including differences in amounts of child's interaction with mother and father, parent-initiated behavior, mother's and father's social-physical play with the child, mother's and father's verbal interaction, and effects of mother's and father's behavior on the child's development. (Author/MS)

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The Father's Impact on Mother and Child

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This paper is the orally presented version of a longer paper -- with tables, bibliography, etc. If you would like a copy of that paper, please send us $3.00 to cover the cost of duplication and postage.

The traditional role of the mother -- cooking and cleaning, comforting and caregiving, cuddling and coddling -- is familiar, and its effects on young children at least well-studied, if not well-known. But what do we know of the comparable role of the father and of its effects on young children? One recent review that sought to answer that question summed up the state of our knowledge with the claim that fathers are "forgotten contributors to child development." Over the past three years, publication of a number of books about fathers, both scholarly and popular, has suggested that fathers are no longer forgotten -- but the nature of their role and their contribution to children's development remains uncharted and unknown.

Children, themselves, have definite ideas about what fathers are, of course. "A father is a man who picks you up and holds you tight when your little and afraid." "...a person who more or less sets examples." "(who)...says to cut your hair and then he grows a mustash." "...a person who most little boys fight over who has the strongest or the smartest." "...a person hoo coaches your baseball team when he's not the coach." "...useful at home to protect his family from damage." (and who)"...like a guidence counslor guides you through the early stages of life (and) leads us from right and wrong."

What psychologists want to know is how these concepts of fathers develop. What in the father's behavior at home leads children to these views? How do fathers interact with their young children? and influence their behavior and development? Only careful and systematic observation of young children and their fathers can answer these questions.

Unfortunately, until quite recently, psychological studies of fathers and children did not add significantly to our knowledge about paternal roles since they

focussed on fathers' absence -- which is, of course, confounded with social psychological and economic circumstances. More recent research has attempted to probe the father's behavior more directly. One kind of study that attempted this -- representing, perhaps, a reaction against current devaluation of the father's role in this society -- has sought to demonstrate how active and involved in child care fathers really are. The agenda of such research seems to be to prove that fathers are (or can be) as good at parenting as mothers are. These studies have shown that fathers are "engrossed" in their infants, and just as nurturant, affectionate, and active as mothers -- at least when interaction is clearly expected and an observer is taking notes. Unfortunately, the distinction between competence and performance limits generalization from these results; although these studies show that fathers <u>can be</u> as active as mothers, they do not establish how much fathers actually <u>do</u> care for their infants in the "privacy of their own homes." Home observations and parental reports suggest that in most homes the opportunities for fathers to display their nurturant talents are not frequent. Estimates of the amount of time fathers spend with their youngsters never exceed three hours per day -- often they are considerably less — and the amount of father-child interaction actually observed has been far, far less.

The alternative approach to demonstrating how much fathers are <u>like</u> mothers has been to investigate how different they are. This approach has also been followed in recent work. Differences between men's and women's responses to children have been documented, and the difference in biological "connectedness" of mothers and fathers to their offspring has been noted. It has been suggested that because of the biological link between mother and infant the mother's effect is more likely to be "direct" and her role to involve physical caregiving, while the father's effect is "indirect" and his role involves fun and games and a link

to the outside world. Few observational data demonstrating such differences in parental styles of interaction have been collected as yet. More frequently demonstrated have been differences in children's reactions to mother and father. Differences in physical proximity and contact, vocalization and visual attention and in the child's responsiveness to play with the parent have been used as indirect evidence for differences in parental styles and roles.

Another approach for evaluating the father's contribution to children's development has been to correlate paternal variables -- warmth, permissiveness, restrictiveness -- with assessments of the child's development -- intelligence, aggression, autonomy. Although this approach, too, is valuable and necessary, one problem that has arisen in such studies is that often investigators, in focussing on the father-child relation, have ignored the concurrent contribution of the mother. This exclusive concentration on the father is as shortsighted as the previously popular focus on mothers. To fully understand children's development, it is necessary to examine their relations with both mother and father simultaneously, to treat mother, father, and child as a triadic system. Taking such a triadic approach implies giving attention to all the possible relations within the family system. Pedersen and his associates have delineated and studied a number of these relations and have provided empirical evidence for a significant association between characteristics of the infant, the relationship between mother and father, and the mother's and father's behavior to the infant. The work of this symposium is to provide further evidence for triadic relations within the family system, and thus to enlarge conceptualization of the father's role in child development.

The study I will describe approaches the father's contribution to child development in the context of a triadic family constellation, attempting to integrate into this triadic framework data that parallel previous investigations of fathers: differences in children's behavior to mother and father and in mothers' and fathers'

behavior to the child, and correlations between parental and child variables. Furthermore, it treats the family triad as a system that is dynamic, examining the interactive behavior of mother, father, and child as they change over time.

The data are drawn from a longitudinal study of 14 children from 1 to 2½ years of age carried out in 1972-3. Children in the study had been randomly selected from hospital birth records. All families were white, but a range of socioeconomic levels from working class to professional class was represented. All mothers were nonworking and their children's primary caregivers.

The data I will describe today were gathered in five different ways. First, in unstructured "natural" observations of child and family at home. These observations occurred in pairs of father present-father absent visits, at three ages: 15, 20, and 30 months. Observations were recorded according to a system I have described previously that involved writing in a two-columned stenographers' notebook abbreviations for the discrete behaviors of the child and of the other persons with whom he interacted, while at the same time marking off 10-second intervals on the record. At the of each observation period, observers were also asked to fill out a set of 5-point scales rating on a more subjective level the quality of the interactions they had just observed.

The second source of data was semi-structured situations. One, at 15 months, was an activity-choice situation, in which parents, at separate visits, were asked to choose and to do things with their child that were either social (like having a pretend tea party), or intellectual (like reading a story). A second kind of semi-structured situation, at 20 months, assessed children's attachment to their parents by having each parent go through sequences of social interaction, separation, and reunion with the child. The third semi-structures situation, at 30 months, called upon parents to do specific activities with the child -- e.g. blowing

bubbles, making designs with straws, playing with balls -- under two conditions: dyadic (with parent and child alone) and triadic (with all three, mother, father, and child, present).

At each of the three age periods (15, 20, and 30 months), mothers were also asked to fill out a "daily record" for the day preceding an observation visit. This record consisted of 104 questions about the child's activities from waking till bedtime -- questions about what he did, when, and with whom. This provided us with the third kind of data reported here. A fourth kind of information was attitudinal, and was derived from written questionnaires. Each parent was asked to rate his or her child for attractiveness, intelligence, likeability, etc.; to indicate the age at which he/she expected the child would achieve certain skills or be allowed to perform certain activities (like crossing the street alone, using scissors, or taking a bath without help); and to indicate the age at which he/she would teach the child certain academic skills like counting, printing his name, or reciting the alphabet. Finally, the fifth kind of data was the assessment of the child's intellectual competence. The Bayley Mental Scale was administered at 16 and 22 months and the Minnesota Child Development Inventory was completed at 30 months to get this information.

What, then, can we say about the father's role in the family and his contribution to his child's development from these data? The theme that appeared in the data and will be elaborated here may be stated most broadly as the demonstration of clear differences -- between parents and children's relations with parents -- but differences always in the context of similarities and communalities.

Let us look first at children's behavior with each parent. Of central and pervasive interest in studies of children's relations with mother and father has

been the question of their attachment to each: is the mother-child bond as unique and special as it has been purported to be? In the present study, the answer is clearly, no: no measure of the child's attachment (negative reaction to separation, positive reaction to reunion, Ainsworth rating, or the amount of positive social interaction in the attachment situation) differentiated between children's behavior with mother and father. According to conventional criteria for attachment, these children at 20 months of age were plainly attached to their fathers, as much as to their mothers, a finding consistent with previous research. Studies that have found that children prefer proximity with mother have been done with younger children or under the stress of a laboratory setting, fatigue, or the presence of a stranger. There seems no doubt that the father's relation with his young children, by 2 years of age, at least, is similar to the mother's in terms of physical and emotional attachment. But what about other aspects of the parent-child relationship?

A second kind of parent-child interaction that has been given theoretical importance and claimed to differentiate between mother and father, is play. Here, again, results of the present study were consistent with previous research, this time, demonstrating that there <u>is</u> a significant difference in children's behavior with mother and father. In the attachment situation just discussed, although no difference in attachment was observed, the children were rated as significantly more responsive to play initiated by the father than to play initiated by the mother. Moreover, this positive reaction to play with the father was even more clearly revealed some months later when children played with both parents in the triadic play situation. Although the behavior of individual children with both parents was basically similar -- that is, correlated -- children were <u>more</u> cooperative, close, involved, excited,

and interested in play with their fathers. Ten of the 14 consistently chose to play with father first and displayed a stronger preference for him as a playmate. An important question that follows from this observation is whether the same differences and preferences appear in the natural situation of the home observations.

In fact, they do not. In unstructured, spontaneous interaction at home, seeing things as close to normal as possible, any "preference" for the father disappears, and mother becomes the predominant partner in all kinds of interaction. Especially marked were the differences in absolute amounts of interaction with mother and father.

Since these differences were affected by differential opportunity for children to engage in interaction with each parent, children's behavior was further analyzed as proportions of the time each parent was actually in the same room as the child and thus available for interaction. Although the interaction of child with mother was consistently more frequent than that with father in these "same room" measures, too, differences were smaller and, significantly, diminished with age. By 30 months, in fact, only one kind of child behavior differentiated between mother and father and that was responsive behavior -- suggesting that observed differences in children's sociability with mother and father at home were not the result of any "preference" for the mother, but appeared because the mother initiated more interaction with the child. The next logical step, obviously, was to look at differences in parents' behavior.

Significant and consistent differences between parents matched perfectly those we have described for children. In the triadic play situation, fathers were rated higher than mothers in ability to engage the child in play

and in their own enjoyment and involvement in the task. They gave more verbal directions to the child and more positive reinforcement. This finding that fathers "got into" the play situation more than mothers, in the triadic situation at 30 months, might have been predicted from the observation that, in the earlier activity probe at 15 months, mothers chose activities that were intellectual while fathers selected social-physical activities to do with the child. It may also be related to the observation of other investigators that fathers are more likely than mothers to hold and rock their newborn infants and that mothers are more likely to encourage their children's independence while fathers help them physically. These observations of parent-initiated behavior in somewhat constrained situations (the lab, the hospital, or specified tasks) consistently show fathers to be more physically and socially involved in play with their children than mothers, and clearly mesh with the difference in children's "preference" for father that has been observed in such situations. Once again, however, we must ask whether the same differences show up in the "real world" of everyday interaction at home.

It goes without saying that, overall, mothers spend vastly more time with their young children than fathers. Even when fathers are at home, as they were during our father observations, however, the data here suggest that mothers still spend more time with the children. Since we know from studies of mother-child interaction that the sheer amount of time spent together does not dramatically affect children's development, perhaps this difference between moms and pops is not critical. What about differences in the amounts of interaction each parent has with the child? Here, too, differences were large, particularly in physical contact and verbal interaction. Mothers consistently touched and talked to children more than fathers did. These differences, moreover, were not

the result of differential preference by the child; there were no differences in responsive parental behavior, only in parent-initiated behavior.

Of course it's no news that mothers touch and talk a lot, and this finding fits with other comparisons of mother-child and father-child interaction. But the place that fathers are supposed to shine, according to popular belief and current theory, is in play, especially physical, rough-and-tumble play. In the present study, although mothers exceeded fathers in the observed frequency of play that involved objects, no difference was found between mothers and fathers in the daily record of play occasions, the observers' rating of the quality of physical or social stimulation, the observed frequency of social-physical play, or the proportion of parent-child interaction that was playful. Fathers may not play with children more than mothers, but play is, at least, a kind of interaction that is relatively balanced between mother and father, where the fathers' effort is not so overwhelmed by the sheer amount of maternal behavior emitted. Father and mother were essentially similar in the amount of social-physical play, its style, stimulation, and vigor, and in its prominence in their interaction with the child. Play with the father, when it occurred, however, was relatively more likely than play with the mother to be physically involving and not distant, mediated by a toy, or done in the interests of intellectual stimulation.

Additional information about the father's play was provided by the daily records kept by the mother. They suggested that the father's role as playmate develops gradually over the period from 15 to 30 months. At 15 months, the child's primary adult playmate was the mother; at 20 months, both parents played

equally often; at 30 months, the father played more often than the mother.

But at the same time as the father was becoming a more frequent playmate, the mother's role as caregiver was diminishing, and parents were becoming increasingly similar on this dimension. This returns us to the other half of our theme -- the similarities -- or lack of differences -- between mothers and fathers, which were as notable as the differences. Mothers and fathers were alike in the "quality" of their interaction with the child during the natural observations -- in measures of contingent responsiveness and observers' ratings. Although the child's interaction with mother was more frequent, it was not judged by an observer to be more stimulating, affectionate, responsive, or effective. Moreover, intercorrelations within sets of parental variables for mothers and for fathers were also similar. Only one pattern was distinctly different, and that, not surprisingly at this point, related to parental play. While play was highly correlated with other measures of stimulation and responsiveness for mothers, it was not so related for dads. In fact, this playful quality -- the same one we suggested is especially "daddish" -- was correlated with fathers' negative emotion. Another element is thus added to our portrait of fathers: not only are fathers physically playful and stimulating, but the most playful fathers, being more involved with their children, may further stimulate and arouse them by scolding, criticizing, and speaking harshly.

Another way of showing the differences and similarities in parental roles is to look at correlations over pairs of spouses. Doing so, we found that generally the same behaviors for mother and father were correlated -- e.g. the amount of maternal speech was correlated with paternal speech -- but, in addition, there were two highly significant cross-modal correlations that

illustrate in one further way the differences in maternal and paternal roles. The father's social-physical play, although only weakly and non-significantly correlated with the mother's social-physical play, was very highly correlated (r = .96) with the mother's talking and playing with the child with toys. These latter kinds of maternal behavior have been found in other research to be central components of a pattern of so-called "optimal maternal care", while mothers' social-physical play has not. The correlations found in the present study seem to suggest that the comparable or matched role for a father to go along with (be married to) an "optimal mother" centrally involves social-physical play -- demonstrating, once more, the centrality and specialness of play in the father's role.

But before we conclude that mothers are poor or uninterested or unappealing playmates, let us look at a particular limitation on all these results discussed thus far -- the restriction that for all these data mother and father were both present during the observations. Perhaps the father's presence affects the mother's play with the child. When we compared matched pairs of father present-father absent observations, it appeared, first of all, that there was a significant effect on the mother's behavior of having the father in the house: the amount of positive and responsive talk by the mother was significantly diminished. This was apparently not a by-product of decreased attention to the mother by the child, as no differences were observed in the frequency of children's behavior. But merely being "at home" is not the best measure of the father's presence. What happens when the father is in the same room as mother and child? To investigate this question we analyzed a subset of the observations during which mother, father, and child were in the same room for more than two-thirds of the observations period. This analysis revealed not only the difference in maternal verbal responsiveness, but also a significant effect on the amount of mother-child play. When father

was present, mother initiated less play with the child.

Does this same effect hold up when mother and father are requested to play with the child, as in the play probes? Returning to our finding that in a triadic play situation children were more cooperative, happy and interested in play with daddy than with mommy, and that daddy was more engaging, directive, and reinforcing, we now find that, in the comparable dyadic play situation when mother and child played the same games alone, the differences in children's play with mother and father totally disappear. Mother-child play in the dyad was significantly greater for every kind of behavior in which a difference between mother and father was observed in the triad. In fact, the amount of social interaction when mother and child were alone was even greater than that of father and child in the triad. Clearly, in a contrived triadic play situation, where both parents are given equal opportunity and are equally willing to play, and where the child chooses one parent for a playmate, fathers are more active and involved and the preferred choice. When father is not there, however, mother is a welcome playmate -- just as interesting and active as dad, and even more sociable. In both natural observations and in requested play situations, the father's presence depresses the amount and quality of mother-child play.

One might speculate about why this depression of mother-child activity occurs. It may be that daddy is such a novel or interesting playmate that, given any opportunity, the child chooses to play with him. This might help account for differences in the play probe. But it is not simply a matter of differences in the child's behavior. When father is around, mother also initiates less play with the child and is, proportionately, less responsive, as well. This may fit a dominant male/submissive female stereotype, as mother lets father take center stage. Or it may just be that whenever she gets a chance, mother lets father do

as much of the child care as he is willing to. In the home situation, it may be that with two adults present interaction with the child is divided between them or that some of the mother's attention is diverted into interaction with her husband. One thing it does suggest is that at home in the normal course of events, active play that involves all three -- mother, father, and child -- simultaneously is not common. It also suggests that researchers must clearly separate their observations of paternal behavior into mother-present and mother-absent situations.

But to return to our theme of similarities laced with differences, we turn, finally, to the question of possible differences in the "effects" of mothers and fathers' behavior on children's development. That is in parents' contributions to child development. We know from other studies that children's development is related to maternal attention and stimulation, affection and responsiveness. Do these same relations appear when child development is correlated with paternal behavior?

In the present study, confirming the results of previous mother-child research, children's intellectual competence was most highly and consistently related to the mother's verbal and materials stimulation, intellectual acceleration, and expression of warmth or positive emotion; it was not related to her physical contact, time in the same room, or amount of play.

The pattern for fathers was somewhat different. Although fathers' verbal and materials stimulation were also related to children's intellectual competence, the correlations were less significant and consistent. The paternal variables most closely associated with children's intelligence were the father's engagement of the child in play in the probe, his positive ratings of the child, his anticipation of the child's independence on the age-expected questionnaire, and

the duration of his interactions with the child in the natural observations.

One proposal suggested by comparing the two patterns of maternal and paternal correlations with children's intellectual development, is that the maternal behaviors, by virtue of their acceleratory and stimulating nature, seem likely to be influences on child development, while paternal behavior that is associated with children's competence -- accepting the child's behavior, expecting early independence, engaging the child in play, rating the child high on intelligence, and interacting longer with the child -- is more likely to be the result of the child's competence.

This proposal was explored further in one final analysis of our data, the examination of changes in parent-child correlations over time. Differences had been documented in the patterns of associations of maternal and paternal behavior with child development. Were there also differences in the directions of those associations? By calculating and comparing the cross-lagged correlations and the standardized path coefficients for parental and child behaviors at 15 months and 30 months, the most plausible direction of influence between parents' and children's behavior was inferred. Here again, a consistent difference between mothers and fathers was apparent. The predominant direction for mother-child variables . was from mother to child. That is, the mother's verbal stimulation and play with toys at 15 months predicted children's subsequent intellectual performance. This causal direction finds support in other research with mothers and children close to this age. For fathers, by contrast, the pattern of correlations suggested the opposite direction of influence -- from child to father. That is, children's superior intellectual performance at 15 months predicted that the father would be more likely to talk and play with the child 15 months later. Putting these relations into a

triadic framework suggests the possibility, anticipated from the observed differences in the maternal and paternal variables that were correlated with assessments of child development, that the chain of family influence affecting children's intellectual competence may be from mother, to child, to father. That is, the mother stimulates the child's development by talking and playing with objects, and the child's competence then is reacted to by the father, inducing father-child conversation and play.

In order to complete the circle, we also examined cross-lagged correlations between mother's and father's behavior. The findings from this analysis take the causal chain a link further. The father's talking and playing with the child at one age was highly predictive of the mother's talking and playing with the child later. This suggests that family interaction is indeed triadic -- and even, perhaps, circular -- from mother to child to father and back to mother. The suggestion of such a triadic chain of influence, while intuitively appealing and consistent with the results of other analyses performed on this particular set of data is highly tentative, of course. It is based on a tiny sample, and relates only to children's intellectual development, to parents' verbal and playful interaction, and to the age period from 15 to 30 months. Its particular usefulness here is to illustrate the complexity of parent-child relations -- a complexity that, quite obviously, is missed if analyses never extend beyond mother-child and father-child pairs.

In brief, in two-parent families at least, fathers and mothers have roles that contain substantial similarities, but are also distinct. They share in, but do not duplicate, each other's efforts. Though both may contribute to children's development, they do not contribute equally or in the same way. They do, quite clearly, create a constellation in the home, that is, truly, one family, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.